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## Picturing Jasenovac: Atrocity Photography Between Evidence and Propaganda

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**Picturing Jasenovac:  
Atrocity Photography Between Evidence and Propaganda**

**Jovan Byford**

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Between 1941 and 1945, approximately 80-100,000 victims perished in Jasenovac, the brutal concentration camp established and run by the pro-Nazi Ustasha regime in the Independent State of Croatia. Most of the victims were Serbs, although among the total number are also up to 13,000 Croatian and Bosnian Jews, around 15,000 Roma and 5,000 Croatian political prisoners.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the broader history of Nazi-occupied Europe, Jasenovac is probably best known for being operated entirely by the Ustashe, without the involvement of, or much encouragement from, their Nazi masters, and for the barbaric methods of execution. Most of the victims were killed by a blow to the head with a mallet or axe, by stabbing, or by having their throats slit with a knife. The ‘intimate’ nature of the executions has led to the common, albeit somewhat misguided inference that this somehow made Jasenovac ‘worse’ than even its much larger, Nazi counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

Jasenovac represents one of the most contentious aspect of the memory of the Second World War in the former Yugoslavia. Since the 1980s it has been a key symbolic battleground in the ‘memory wars’ between Serbian and Croatian nationalist elites. Disputes over the number of victims and the nature and purpose of the camp, which have dominated the Jasenovac controversies, have been explored and written about in considerable detail.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, much less scholarly attention has been devoted to the deep divisions regarding the photographic record of Jasenovac and the role of atrocity images in representing the horrors of this camp. This is a surprising omission, given that atrocity images, and their uses and abuses, are central to the Jasenovac debates: just like the issue of the number of victims, the question about how Jasenovac should be represented visually polarizes post-Yugoslav societies, and remains a significant barrier to regional reconciliation.

For example, in Serbia and in the Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska, atrocity photographs are routinely presented in the mainstream press, in television documentaries and news reports, in books

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<sup>1</sup> The figures are based on the records of the Jasenovac Memorial Site, whose database currently contains the names of 83,145 victims including 47,627 Serbs, 16,173 Roma, 13,116 Jews, 4,255 Croats and 1,974 victims of other nationalities (see <http://www.jusp-jasenovac.hr/Default.aspx?sid=6711>). There is however widespread recognition among scholars in the region that these figures are incomplete, and that the total number of victims is likely to be closer to 100,000.

<sup>2</sup> Gideon Greif in “Izraeliski profesor: Jasenovac je bio gori od Aušvica”, *Blic*, 26, July, 2017; Jaša Almulji in Slobodan Kljakić, “Jasenovac gori od Aušvica,” *Politika*, 7 February 2010.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent review see Pål Kolstø, “The Serbian-Croatian controversy over Jasenovac,” in *Serbia and the Serbs in World War Two*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet and Ole Lister-Jones (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 225-246.

and exhibitions devoted to Jasenovac.<sup>4</sup> One can even speak of a distinct atrocity-focused aesthetic of memory, captured in the large number of graphic images of, for instance, decomposing bodies, decapitated or disemboweled victims, corpses of children, and the like, which frame public understanding of the suffering of Serbs during the Second World War. The *quantity* of images which are usually presented together, or in a sequence, accentuates the scale of Serbian suffering (in both Serbia and Republika Srpska, the now discredited, inflated figure of 700,000 Jasenovac victims still has an official status in public discourse), while their explicit and disturbing *quality* sustains the vision of the Ustashe as uniquely barbaric and evil, and of Jasenovac as a place of unimaginable cruelty.

Meanwhile, in Croatia, these same photographs are seldom shown in public. The argument there is that explicit images of violence are incompatible with the new, ethically informed, victim-centered memory of the horrors of Jasenovac, one that respects the dignity of the dead, and moves away from the aesthetic of shock.<sup>5</sup> This has resulted in a preference for images of landscapes, objects and ruins, which hint at the violence without showing its effects, or, for example, for photographs of deportations, rather than killings.<sup>6</sup> Also, it is often argued that the legacy of propagandistic misuse of atrocity photographs by Serbian nationalists in the 1980s and 1990s, especially through photographic exhibitions, compromises their status as a medium through which the past can be adequately represented. This argument sometimes goes as far as to suggest that Second World War-era atrocity photographs were an instrument of war in the 1990s, in that their dissemination helped whip up the nationalist frenzy among Serbs and incited them to violence.<sup>7</sup>

The single most contentious aspect of the photographic record of Jasenovac has been the questionable 'authenticity' of many of the images used over the years to depict the killings at the camp. As Nataša Mataušić has shown, photographs that demonstrably have little to do with Jasenovac have frequently been attributed to it.<sup>8</sup> This has been the case with photographs depicting Ustasha killings perpetrated at other, usually indeterminable locations, or crimes committed by German troops. Even photographs purporting to show Partisan atrocities, which appeared in Ustasha propaganda literature published during the war, have been used in this way. Through erroneous, or in some instances deliberately misleading captions, descriptions and attributions, these photographs, Mataušić argues, have become an 'instrument of untruth.'<sup>9</sup>

Misattribution of images to which Mataušić draws attention is not unique either to Jasenovac or to the Yugoslav context. The Second World War produced an imperfect photographic record, and there are many examples where photographs of one atrocity have been used to portray unrelated locations and

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. Jovan Mirković, *Zločini nad Srbima u Nezavisnoj Državi Hrvatskoj – Fotomonografija* (Belgrade: Svet Knjige, 2014), *Jasenovac: Suština užasa*, directed by Milan Stevanović (Belgrade: Filmske Novosti, 2008); Permanent exhibition "Jasenovac: Sistem ustaških logora smrti" at the Museum of Republika Srpska, Banja Luka.

<sup>5</sup> Nataša Jovičić, "Jasenovac Memorial Museum's permanent exhibition – the victim as an Individual," *Review of Croatian History* 2, no.1 (2006), pp. 295-299.

<sup>6</sup> The most prominent example of this representational strategy is the exhibition at the Jasenovac Memorial Museum which opened in 2006. For a critique of the exhibition see Ljiljana Radonic, "Slovak and Croatian invocation of Europe: the Museum of the Slovak National Uprising and the Jasenovac Memorial Museum," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 42, no.3: 489-507.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. This claim was also made by the Croatian legal team during the protracted legal case before the International Court of Justice, which involved Serbia and Croatia unsuccessfully suing each other for genocide perpetrated during the 1990s. See *Croatia v. Serbia, Case Concerning the Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, Case No. ICJ-118, Reply of the Republic of Croatia Vol. 1, December 2010, p.51 (<http://www.icj-cij.org/files/case-related/118/18198.pdf>).

<sup>8</sup> Nataša Mataušić, *Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac: Fotomonografija* (Zagreb: Spomen Područje Jasenovac, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.18

events.<sup>10</sup> Yet very little has been written on how and why these misattributions happen. In the case of Jasenovac, the causes are most frequently sought in deliberate attempts at falsification of history, first by Yugoslav communist authorities and later by Serbian nationalists.<sup>11</sup> In this article, however, I argue that misattributions have a more complex history, rooted in the way in which, after the war, Yugoslav authorities, and especially the State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Accomplices, engaged with broader issues about the role of visual evidence in documenting atrocity, about the propaganda potential and emotional power of violent images, and the ways in which they can be deployed strategically to sustain particular narratives of victimhood and villainy. In examining these early challenges of rendering visible the scope and horror of suffering at Jasenovac, the article also considers how atrocity images, which at present polarize the region, might be incorporated, in a more constructive and reconciliatory way, into the public memory of Ustasha genocide.

### **Yugoslav State Commission, atrocity images, and "stories of terror and devastation"**

Most atrocity photographs that have been used over the years to depict Jasenovac originate from the collection of images assembled between 1944 and 1947 by the Yugoslav State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Occupiers and their Accomplices. Formally established in November 1943, in response to the Moscow Declaration in which Allied governments committed to the prosecution of Nazi war criminals, the State Commission was involved in compiling a register of crimes committed on Yugoslav territory, gathering statistical data on human losses and material damage, and assembling a list of suspected war criminals, foreign and domestic. The State Commission was a complex, hierarchically structured and highly bureaucratic organisation. At the top of the hierarchy was the federal State Commission that oversaw the undertakings of seven subsidiary commissions: a Country Commission for each of the six newly formed Yugoslav republics, and one Provincial Commission for Vojvodina, which, within the new, federal organisation of the country, had the status of an autonomous province within Serbia. Each Country or Provincial commission coordinated its own network of regional branches, which, in turn, had their own subsidiaries. The pyramid-like structure of the institution, whose different levels mirrored the emerging administrative division of the country, cascaded down to the level of boroughs and municipalities.

The Commission's teams of investigators spent most of the time collecting statements from witnesses and survivors, inspecting enemy archives seized in liberated territories, conducting field investigations at major killing sites, and, occasionally, supervising exhumations of mass graves.<sup>12</sup> Their remit also included gathering photographs of atrocities. Article 4 of the Commission's statute mandated the gathering of "photographic images which show either a criminal act, the site or traces of a crime, weapons used in the perpetration of a crime, or the perpetrators."<sup>13</sup> Protocols and instructions which the country commissions issued to local branches were replete with reminders that photographs are essential for documenting crimes, or as one document put it, for evidencing "everything the blood-soaked occupier, the Schwab and the Italian, and their helpers the Chetniks and the Ustashe did to our innocent nations."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Josip Pečarić, *Srpski mit o Jasenovcu: Skrivanje istine o beogradskim konc-logorima* (Zagreb, Dom & Svijet, 1998); Tomislav Vuković, "Fotokrivotvorine o jasenovačkome logoru" (seven parts), *Glas Koncila*, February 8 – March 22, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> "Izveštaj Dr Nedeljkovića o radu komisije za period 1943-1948," Archive of Yugoslavia (AJ), Fond 110, K-1, 132, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> "Statut Državne komisije," AJ, Fond 110, K-1, 2.

<sup>14</sup> "Prikupljajte fotografije," undated, Archive of Bosnia Herzegovina (ABiH), Fond Zemaljske Komisije BiH, 1944/47, Ratni izveštaji i uputstva 1, 126.

Most of around 6,000 photographs which the Commission assembled during three years of existence came from "enemy sources": they were found among the possessions of captured or killed enemy soldiers, or among the property left behind by retreating armies. In addition, the commission's investigators occasionally photographed field investigations and exhumations of mass graves.<sup>15</sup> Because of a more general shortage of equipment, materials, and expertise, detailed examinations and exhumations were limited to specialist Committees of Inquiry (*anketne komisije*) appointed to investigate major killing sites, concentrations camps and mass graves. In Croatia, such Committees of Inquiry existed for camps in Jasenovac, Stara Gradiška, and Lepoglava.

Atrocity photographs gathered in this way played a particularly prominent role in the pursuit of what was identified at the outset as the State Commission's "political" remit: evidence of war crimes was gathered not just so that "criminal proceedings could be brought against the perpetrators" but also for the purposes of "informing the domestic and foreign public" about the enemy's "bestialities" and the suffering of the Yugoslav peoples.<sup>16</sup> The "political" remit was accomplished through cooperation with the press, especially the major dailies—*Politika*, *Vjesnik*, *Oslobođenje*, *Borba*—which provided the main conduit for publicising the Commission's findings. Photographs depicting fascist crimes, which were supplied by the commission "for purposes of propaganda" featured regularly in newspaper articles, in published communiqués and reports, and perhaps most importantly, in exhibitions organised by the Commission and its subsidiaries. The largest of these exhibitions, which included more than 800 photographs, opened in Belgrade on March 1946, and later toured all the major Yugoslav cities. Numerous other, smaller exhibitions were organised by the Country Commissions and their local offices between 1945 and 1947. One of the earliest, created under the auspices of the Commission for Croatia, opened in Zagreb in August 1945.

Underpinning the use of photographs was the implicit belief in their direct, persuasive power.<sup>17</sup> Photographs were believed to strengthen the credibility of documents, testimonies, and other legal evidence, but they were also considered important in their own right, as visual shortcuts that circumvent the complexity of other forms of evidence and communicate directly the essence of suffering. "It is on photographs that one most clearly sees all the horrors of the bloody terror against our innocent people," stated the leaflet entitled "Gather photographs!" printed by the Country Commission for Bosnia. "Photographs speak even without words, and they will recount to the whole freedom-loving humanity the horrors of occupation... It will be enough for our allies to look at the photographs. There will be too many documents for them to look at every page. But these photographs will tell a story. A story of terror and devastation."<sup>18</sup>

Atrocity images were also instrumental in sustaining a specific interpretation of fascism that permeated the official propaganda at the time. Fascism was viewed as an evil ideology, but also as a mental affliction, a form of "psychosis" that turned people into "murderous cannibals" who derive almost sensual pleasure from brutal killings and torture.<sup>19</sup> Within this psychologized account of fascism, emphasis was placed, both in the text and supporting photographs, on the intimate, face-to-face nature of the fascist killing. The descriptions and portrayals of frenzied killing orgies, the murder of women and children, mutilation of victims' bodies, rape and other "unbelievable bestialities," attributed in equal measure to German, Italian, Chetnik and Ustasha soldiers, framed the crimes committed by the fascists as what Lawrence Douglas called "*crimes of atavism*: horrific deeds committed in an orgy of mass savagery and lawlessness."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Izveštaj Dr Nedeljkovića o radu komisije," pp. 29-30.

<sup>16</sup> Hodimir Sirotković, ed., *ZAVNOH, Zbornik Dokumentata, 1944* (Zagreb, Institut za Historiju Radničkog Pokreta Hrvatske, 1975), p. 353.

<sup>17</sup> "Izveštaj Dr Nedeljkovića o radu komisije," p.82

<sup>18</sup> "Prikupljajte fotografije!"

<sup>19</sup> Dušan Nedeljković, "Novost fašističkog i petokolonaškog zločina u istoriji zločinstva," date unknown, AJ, Fond 110, K-28, 1024-1028.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Douglas, "The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald: Icons of Atrocity at Nuremberg," *Representations*, no. 63 (Summer 1998), p.42

In weaving the "story about terror and devastation" in occupied Yugoslavia, the State Commission paid special attention to concentration camps, and specifically to Jasenovac. Very early on in the war, partisans recognised Jasenovac as the epitome of suffering under the fascist yoke. One of the earliest calls for the collection of evidence of "crimes against the people of Yugoslavia perpetrated by fascist butchers" was issued in an article on Jasenovac, published in November 1942 in the partisan newspaper *Borba*.<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter, partisans in Croatia published the booklet *Jasenovac camp: testimonies of inmates who escaped from the camp*—the first publication of its kind in occupied Yugoslavia.<sup>22</sup> What made Jasenovac stand out in the eyes of the partisan leadership was not just the viciousness of the killings for which it was becoming infamous but also the fact that it was a concentration camp—a place of large scale, industrial killing that, as the war progressed, was becoming recognised as emblematic of Nazi criminality. In the summer and autumn of 1944, when images from Majdanek, the first concentration camp liberated by Soviet troops, began to receive international attention, the belief in the symbolic importance of concentration camps increased further.<sup>23</sup> It is not by accident that it was around that time, in October 1944—more than six months before partisan units entered Jasenovac—that regional branches of the Country Commission for Croatia were instructed to get ready for an investigation, which was to include "photographing all building, camps, and means of torture [...] immediately, as soon as these sites are liberated."<sup>24</sup> Yugoslavia, just like Poland, needed its powerful visual icons of atrocity that would "tell the story" about the scale and horror of suffering, and tie the fate of Yugoslavs to that of other martyred nations in Europe.

### **Smashed skulls and dead bodies washed up on the river bank: visualizing the horrors of Ustasha "hell"**

The Croatian Country Commission's investigators arrived in Jasenovac on May 18, 1945, a couple of weeks after partisan units first entered the camp, and almost a month after it was abandoned by the Ustashe.<sup>25</sup> Among them were photojournalists, invited to document the inquiry and create a photographic record of this iconic place of fascist brutality.<sup>26</sup> However, upon arrival at Jasenovac, the investigators encountered the camp and the adjacent village deserted and practically razed to the ground. The camp buildings had been blown up by the Ustashe prior to their retreat, leaving little for the investigators to examine and record. Among the eerie ruins, there were no masses of emaciated bodies or piles of skeletal human corpses, no crowded barracks, gas chambers or crematoria, no gruesome scenes matching the status of Jasenovac or opportunities to create striking and harrowing images, comparable to the liberation photographs from Auschwitz, Dachau or Buchenwald which adorned the front pages of the international press. Investigators discovered some badly decomposed bodies floating in the shallow, murky waters of the Sava, and many more skeletal remains set into the muddy clay on the river bank. But there was little that differentiated Jasenovac from scenes encountered at numerous other locations which did not have the resonance of Jasenovac as the place of unimaginable suffering and unprecedented cruelty. Photographs of bare skulls and bones, or of

<sup>21</sup> "U čast Pavelićevog rođendana zaklano 1.000 djece," *Borba*, 21 November 1942, p.3.

<sup>22</sup> Pavlič Nikola, ed., *Jasenovački logor: izkazi zatočenika koji su pobjegli iz logora* (Propagandni odsjek Narodno-oslobodilačkog vijeća Jugoslavije, 1942).

<sup>23</sup> Majdanek was liberated on 22 July 1944. "Report of the Polish-Soviet Extraordinary Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Committed by the German fascist invaders in the extermination camp at Majdanek in the town of Lublin" was first published in *Soviet War News* 965 (September 19, 1944).

<sup>24</sup> *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka o narodnooslobodilačkom ratu jugoslovenskih naroda*, Vol. V, Book 34, (Belgrade Vojnoistorijski institut, 1966), p. 548.

<sup>25</sup> A smaller investigation was carried out in a section of the camp a week earlier, by the local branch of the commission from Novska. The commission's investigators returned to Jasenovac again in June 1945. See Đorđe Mihovilović, *Jasenovac 1945 – 1947. Fotomonografija* (Jasenovac: JUSP Jasenovac, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> A large collection of photographs taken during the State Commission's investigations at Jasenovac and Stara Gradiška are reproduced in Mihovilović, *Jasenovac 1945 – 1947*.

individual skeletons scattered across the site, conveyed neither the horror and goriness of the violence, nor the sheer scale of the killings, which at that time was estimated at around 500-700,000 victims.

The shortage of suitably poignant visual material presented a problem. No other visual record of Jasenovac existed at the time, except for a collection of staged propaganda photographs and film footage created by the Ustashe in 1942, which showed everything that the camp was *not*.<sup>27</sup> In the absence of powerful imagery, how does one portray that which in the Commission's own words, would seem "unbelievable, impossible" to "any normal human being who did not witness or experience these atrocities"?<sup>28</sup> How does one reconcile what *happened* at Jasenovac with what could be *seen* in the somewhat ineffective photographs taken at the scene?

The solution was to turn other available images of Ustasha brutality into visual markers for Jasenovac. The earliest, official post-war account of crimes perpetrated at the camp—the Country Commission for Croatia's 85-page booklet on Jasenovac, published in 1946—offers a relevant example.<sup>29</sup> The report contains 14 photographs, including those showing the ruins of the camp and skeletal remains found in May 1945, as well as portraits of the "main Ustasha criminals - throat-cutters." Of interest, however, are images which appear in the section on the treatment of inmates by the Ustashe.<sup>30</sup> This section comprises selected extracts from witness testimonies, with vivid descriptions of the worst excesses of Ustasha brutality. These are accounts of arbitrary punishments and killings, sadistic methods of torture, blood drinking, sexual mutilation, decapitation and dismemberment, children being impaled on bayonets and descriptions of the most common methods of killing—throat cutting and a blow to the head with a mallet or hammer. Quotations from witness statements pertaining to the latter methods are accompanied by a photograph of "a wooden mallet that Ustashe used to kill their victims."<sup>31</sup> This was one of several implements, or murder weapons, discovered and photographed by the war crimes investigators during their visit to Jasenovac. On the next page, there is a head shot of a recently deceased male victim, laid on a wooden surface (fig. 1). Clearly visible is a large laceration and skull fracture on the right side of the forehead, exposing what appears like an empty cranial cavity. The caption reads "frontal bone shattered with a mallet." Some pages later, shortly before the description of an instance where Ustashe cut open a pregnant woman's abdomen and extracted the unborn child, there is photograph of a fresh, partially clothed male corpse, with intestines visibly protruding through a gash across the lower abdomen. The caption reads "victim with their belly slashed open" (fig. 2).

Neither of the two graphic images used to illustrate Ustasha depravity could have been taken at Jasenovac. In the report, the pathologist who examined the bodies is said to have recorded that corpses discovered during the Commission's second visit to the site in June 1945 were "two to three months old, in some cases even older" and badly decomposed.<sup>32</sup> Three photographs of skeletal remains featured in the penultimate section of the report clearly show this. In fact, one of these images is remarkably similar, in terms of composition, subject matter and caption, to that used to illustrate the execution with a mallet, except that it shows skeletal remains rather than a fresh body. It is a head shot of a smashed human skull, accompanied by a caption "a blow to the frontal bone with a mallet." We can only speculate why this image was not used in the earlier section to illustrate Ustasha brutality. One possibility is that the purpose of the image was not to present the anatomical consequences of the blow to the head—the photograph of the skull would have been adequate for that—but to convey the actual horror and goriness of the execution. The skull was what the investigators found in 1945; the

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<sup>27</sup> See Mataušić, *Koncentracioni Logor Jasenovac – Fotomonografija*, p. 70. There is also a series of five images which are believed to show of a group of men arriving at Jasenovac, and being stripped of their belongings. However, it is unclear when these were discovered; *ibid.*, p.125-128.

<sup>28</sup> *Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske za utvrđivanje zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača, Zločini u Logoru Jasenovac* (Zagreb: Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske, 1946), p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske, Zločini u Logoru Jasenovac*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19-27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23. Some of these implements are on display at the Jasenovac Memorial Museum.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.

much more explicit and graphic Figure 1 represented what survivors, whose words the photographs illustrated, witnessed and described in their testimony.

**Fig. 1 and Fig. 2:** “Frontal bone shattered with a mallet” and “Victim with their belly slashed open”: images from the Sisak execution used to illustrate the horror of Jasenovac killings.



The origin of Figures 1 and 2 has not been difficult to trace: they belong to a large collection of photographs, around 160 in total, which document the retrieval and burial of victims from the town of Sisak, executed by the Ustashe and dumped in the river Sava shortly before their retreat from the city in early May 1945.<sup>33</sup> When the daily *Vjesnik* reported on the executions several weeks later, it mentioned “between 350 and 400” dead, although this number should be treated with caution given the more general tendency, at the time, to inflate the number of victims.<sup>34</sup> An official memorandum, which Branko Drezga, the public prosecutor for the region of Banija, sent to his superiors in Zagreb on 15 May 1945 cites a more probable, albeit approximate figure, of 150.<sup>35</sup>

The Sisak collection includes mainly forensic photographs of the corpses *in situ*, on the banks of the river or in the shallow water, or of victims after they have been recovered and lined up for inspection and identification, either in simple wooden coffins or on the ground.<sup>36</sup> Many photographs of individual victims show them with clothes partially removed, so that their wounds could be examined and cause of death confirmed. Among them are two different versions of each of the images featured in the Jasenovac report, taken from slightly different angles.<sup>37</sup> There are also images of the recovery process—the retrieval of the victims from the river, the removal of mud from their faces, etc.—and of civilians, including many grieving women wearing mourning attire, who had gathered in the hope of finding and identifying their loved ones. The mixture of different photographic genres within the collection—the aesthetically unpretentious forensic photographs alongside the artistically much more accomplished images of grieving wives and mothers, or the wide angled shot of the row of bodies and coffins—suggests that they were probably taken by a professional photographer or a photojournalist.

<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> There is also a third image from Sisak in the report on Jasenovac. In the penultimate section of the report, which features the photographs of the skeletal remains, mentions how Ustashe tied weights to the bodies of their victims before dumping them in the river, to prevent them from floating. A photograph from Sisak matching this description is used to illustrate this claim. Zemaljska komisija Hrvatske, *Zločini u Logoru Jasenovac*, p.73.

<sup>34</sup> “Ustaški koljači poubijali su u Sisku noć prije svog povlačenja oko 400 građana i seljaka,” *Vjesnik*, May 19, 1945, p. 3

<sup>35</sup> See Zdravko Dizdar, et al. *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u hrvatskoj, 1944.-1946. Dokumenti* (Slavonski brod, Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2005), pp. 108-111.

<sup>36</sup> The collection can be found in the Croatian State Archives, HDA, Fond Agencije za fotodokumentaciju, Album 31, Ratni zločini I, F161-325. Among the images are some duplicates.

<sup>37</sup> Images F219 and F234 for fig.1 and F220 and F246 for fig. 2

<sup>38</sup> The identity of the photographer who documented this event has been impossible to determine. It has been suggested by several authors that it was Hugo Fisher-Ribarić, a well-known partisan photographer, although this



The photographs from Sisak are important because many of them have been used in subsequent years and decades to illustrate the killings at Jasenovac and other Ustasha concentration camps.<sup>39</sup> This trend began on the very same day that the killings in Sisak was first reported in *Vjesnik*. In the same issue, just two pages after the article on Sisak, a different photograph from the exhumation was used to illustrate a piece on the killings at the Stara Gradiška camp.<sup>40</sup> On the following day, yet another appeared in an article on the killings in Jasenovac.<sup>41</sup> Later that month, in *Narodni List*, a photograph of a disembowelled victim from Sisak accompanied the text of the Country Commission for Croatia's report on the camp in Lepoglava.<sup>42</sup> On this occasion, the captions correctly identified the photographs as showing victims recovered from the Sava in Sisak. Nevertheless, because of their availability and visual poignancy, they were used as generic illustrations of Ustasha brutality. Already on June 6, *Narodni List* published an image from the collection with a much less specific caption: "A document of Ustasha terror."<sup>43</sup>

The challenges of representing Jasenovac revealed in the Commission's report were apparent also in the 15-minute documentary *Jasenovac*, released in 1945, and shown in cinemas around the country. In the part of the film which describes conditions in the camp, the authors Gustav Gavrin and Kosta Hlavaty utilised Ustasha propaganda footage of inmates building flood defences around the camp. The use of this footage created an obvious incongruity between the relatively benign working conditions shown on film, and the voiceover which describes summary executions and exhausted inmates coiling under "Ustasha whips and raffle butts." Likewise, there was a discrepancy between descriptions of malnourishment and deprivation, and footage of prisoners being handed bread and soup, footage which, incidentally, was created by the Ustashe precisely to counter the claims of starvation at Jasenovac. Atrocity photographs, including many of the forensic closeup shots of the victims from Sisak, showing slit throats, splits skulls or slashed abdomens, provided the necessary corrective: they are shown, individually or as a sequence, to demonstrate the horrific and indescribable' torture of prisoners, and the "sadistic and pathological urges" of the perpetrators.<sup>44</sup> Corpses discovered in Jasenovac are also shown, but only at the end of the film. They are offered as a demonstration of the failure of the "crazed Ustaša executioners" to destroy all traces of their crime, and as evidence of what the camp looked like in 1945. Just like in the Commission's report, decomposed bodies and skeletons in the mud offered incontrovertible proof that the crimes took place, but other photographs were needed to capture the brutality, the "blood and guts" of Jasenovac executions.<sup>45</sup>

The documentary reveals a further important function of the spectacle of atrocity: to inspire feelings of revenge, and legitimize what Milovan Djilas later described as the climate of "collective retribution, violence and death" that followed Partisan victory.<sup>46</sup> In the film, over a mixture of footage of the banks of the river in Jasenovac, and still shots of atrocities from other locations, the narrator calls for revenge: "Disembowelled corpses, mutilated bodies and skeletons, victims from earlier in the war and the last days of the camp, are all crying out for revenge, in their own name and in the name of their fallen comrades." The film ends with footage of a march in Zagreb, featuring people carrying banners with slogans "victims of Jasenovac are crying out for vengeance." At one point, the camera

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claim is based on hearsay, rather than reliable evidence. e.g. Mataušić, *Koncentracioni Logor Jasenovac – Fotomonografija*, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> See Mataušić, *Koncentracioni Logor Jasenovac – Fotomonografija*.

<sup>40</sup> "Koncentracioni logori: Stara Gradiška," *Vjesnik*, May 19, 1945, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> "Koncentracioni logori: Nožem i maljem," *Vjesnik*, May 20, 1945, p.5.

<sup>42</sup> "Strahote logora u Lepoglavi," *Narodni list*, May 31, 1945, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> "Dokumenat ustaškog terora," *Narodni list*, June 6, 1945, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Alongside the images from Sisak were some taken during exhumations in Lepoglava, but also photographs published in Ustasha propaganda literature purporting to show Partisan executions of Croatian civilians, see Matija Kovačić, *Odmetnička zvjerstva i pustošenja u Nezavisnoj državi Hrvatskoj: u prvim mjesecima života Hrvatske narodne države* (Zagreb, Naklada Hrvatskog izdavačkog bibliografskog zavoda, 1942).

<sup>45</sup> *Jasenovac*, directed by Gustav Gavrin and Kosta Hlavaty (Zagreb, Filmsko poduzeće FDJ, 1945)

<sup>46</sup> Milovan Djilas, *Wartime* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 449.

zooms in on a photograph of a dead body from Sisak which appears to be pinned to the wall or noticeboard, next to the slogan: "death to those who spilled the blood of innocent people!"

The motif of revenge, which had been the staple ingredient of Partisan propaganda since the beginning of the war, acquired particular significance when retributions began in 1945. This was especially the case in Zagreb, where, in the months following the liberation of the city, security services expressed concern that many collaborators were still hiding in the Croatian capital, and that reprisals against suspected collaborators and other "enemies of the people" were not progressing with the required urgency.<sup>47</sup> Part of the problem were various "opportunists" and "appeasers" among the residents, who objected to arrests and executions, and in doing so, it was argued, abetted the criminals.<sup>48</sup> To counter the popular discontent over retributions, the authorities organised public protests, and issued press releases warning of the danger posed by the presence of "unpunished criminals," condemning "advocates of fascism and their assistants," and calling for "revenge" against the traitors. The film *Jasenovac* was undoubtedly a part of this wider propaganda effort, as was the exhibition of around 180 photographs which the Country Commission for Croatia opened in Zagreb in the late summer of 1945. Importantly, the exhibition was not exclusively about the Ustashe: organizers were careful to observe the principle of symmetry of victimhood and villainy among the Yugoslav nations which permeated state propaganda at the time, so they emphasized the ultimate culpability of the German and Italian occupiers for crimes in Yugoslavia. Yet media reports paid special attention to the part of the exhibition devoted to Jasenovac, and offered vivid description of the most graphic images.<sup>49</sup> Atrocity images were, therefore, a reminder, and a warning. A report which the Country Commission for Croatia submitted to the headquarters in Belgrade, explicitly cited, as the key message of this exhibition, revenge, and the importance of taking the slogan "death to fascism – freedom to the people" literally.<sup>50</sup>

Going back to the Sisak images, their "usefulness" for representing Jasenovac extended beyond the fact that they contained closeups shots of horrific injuries. They provided also a way of visualising the scale of the killings. Three images have been used regularly to that effect, including in the 1945 documentary *Jasenovac*.<sup>51</sup> Two show tangled bodies on the steep slope of the riverbank (fig. 3 and fig. 4), while the third is of a row of bodies laid out on the muddy ground, with people gathering around to inspect and identify them (fig.5).

**Fig. 3 and Fig. 4:**  
*Bodies on the river  
bank in Sisak:  
representing what  
riverbanks in  
Jasenovac must have  
looked like.*



<sup>47</sup> Vladimir Geiger, et al., eds, *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj 1944.-1946. Dokumenti Zagreb i središnja Hrvatska* (Zagreb, Hrvatski institut za povjest, 2008), p.378.

<sup>48</sup> "Hrvatska javnost i štampa zalažu se za najstrožije kažnjavanje ustaša i koljača," *Politika*, June 3, 1945, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> E.g. "Izložba o zvjerstvima okupatora", *Ilustrirani vjesnik*, no. 5 (August 1945), p.12.

<sup>50</sup> "Izložba fotografija zločina okupatora i njihovih pomagača," AJ, Fond 110, K-32, 32-37.

<sup>51</sup> For examples see Mataušić, *Koncentracioni Logor Jasenovac – Fotomonografija*, pp. 19-25.

It is easy to see why these images presented themselves as suitable illustrations of Jasenovac. Sisak and Jasenovac are on the same river, 60 kilometres apart. There is a remarkable similarity between some of the images of the riverbank in Jasenovac taken in 1945, and scenes depicted in Figures 3 and 4, taken in Sisak. Except for one difference: the latter are "populated" with bodies. In the light of the emphasis, in representations of Jasenovac, on *mass* executions on the infamous Granik loading dock—the execution site where victims were slain and thrown into the river—this was a crucial difference. What is more, the images shown in public were often cropped to reduce the empty spaces thus making the riverbank seem more crowded with dead bodies. Figure 5, showing a different scene, is visually the most striking of the three photographs. The neatly arranged row of bodies recovered from the river, stretches from the foreground to the background of the photograph, giving the impression of an endless line of death and suffering. There is a similarly composed iconic image from the concentration camp in Nordhausen, in Germany, taken after liberation, which also offers a long view of bodies lined up in the camp courtyard. As Barbie Zelizer points out, such scenes of mass, "outdoor horror" were highly effective in representing visually the *scope* of the atrocities in Nazi concentration camps.<sup>52</sup> This was precisely the aspect of Jasenovac that images *from* Jasenovac could not adequately capture, but those from Sisak could.<sup>53</sup>

**Fig. 5:** *Endless line of death and suffering: visualising the scale of the killing at Jasenovac.*



<sup>52</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>53</sup> Similar images of rows of bodies lined up on the ground were also taken during exhumations in Lepoglava. These two have been used over the years as illustrations of killings in Jasenovac.

The process by which scenes from Sisak became symbolic markers for Jasenovac was facilitated also by the fact that, from the outset, the two events were seen as connected. When *Vjesnik* reported the recovery and burial of the bodies, it mentioned that the majority of those killed had been arrested by Ustashe in April that year, and were destined for Jasenovac. Given that at that point Jasenovac was being "liquidated," prisoners were locked up in a local factory, from where they were dragged to the execution site and killed just before Ustashe fled the town.<sup>54</sup> Also, it was alleged that among those killed were members of a unit of the regular Croatian army, the Domobrani, who had previously been stationed in Jasenovac, and who were executed as potential eyewitnesses to the horrors at the camp. The extent to which this version of events is true is impossible to verify.<sup>55</sup> One of the points made in *Vjesnik*'s report, which was possibly the reason this event received widespread coverage in the Croatian press, was that most of those executed in Sisak were Croats. Presenting Sisak's Croatian population, and even the regular army of the Independent State of Croatia, as victims of the Ustashe—and tying their fate to the horrors of Jasenovac—may have been a way of countering widespread perceptions in liberated Croatian towns and villages that Partisans were waging a vengeful, pro-Serbian war.<sup>56</sup> What is important, however, is that the confusion about who was executed in Sisak and why, and the precise nature of the link between events in Sisak and Jasenovac created opportunities for errors and misunderstandings. Thus, when the prosecutor Branko Drezga reported on the situation in Sisak to his superiors, on May 15, 1945, he described the victims not as inmates *destined* for Jasenovac, but as "inmates from Jasenovac."<sup>57</sup>

It is quite possible that similar "slippage" in meaning occurred also in the reading of the photographs. This is especially so given the inadequate curatorial practices of the State Commission that facilitated such errors. Article 5 of the State Commission's statute stated that all evidence—including photographs—must be accompanied by reliable information about its provenance, about what crime it pertains to, and how it was obtained.<sup>58</sup> Yet detailed information of this kind was seldom available. Photographs were obtained from a variety of sources—partisan units, security services, members of the public—who generally did not record, or possess, the relevant information. Also, most photographs changed hands numerous times before they reached the Commission, and then again as they were passed up the hierarchy, from local branches, through Country Commissions to the State Commission. At each stage, photographs were classified into thematic boxed collections and representative albums, usually according to the nationality of the perpetrator (e.g. 'Ustasha crimes', 'Chetnik crimes', etc.) and location of the crime. As photographs moved along the often-broken chain of custody, the designations, and descriptions—usually in the form of one-line scribbles of undeterminable provenance or accuracy on the back of the photographs, or in the margin—were changed or embellished. Photographs from the same roll of film would sometimes get separated, while unrelated images would get linked. Even the distinction between photographs confiscated from the enemy and those taken by war crimes investigators was sometimes lost. That is why we have numerous examples where the same image is used to depict two different events, or two very different images are used as illustrations of the same crime. Amid this confusion, and given the emerging symbolic importance of Jasenovac as a place of suffering, it should come as no surprise that many images became associated with it. By the time a selection of photographs from Sisak reached the State Commission's central photo-archive in Belgrade, the "slippage" was complete. The back of Figure 4

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<sup>54</sup> "Ustaški koljači...", p.5.

<sup>55</sup> In recent years, it has even been suggested that the executions may have been carried out by Partisans after the liberation of Sisak (see Mataušić, *Koncentracioni Logor Jasenovac – Fotomonografija*, p.23). The only evidence supporting this claim is the fact that this was reported at the time, on an Ustasha-controlled radio station. It is however more plausible that, on this occasion, it was the Ustashe who were trying to pin their victims on the Partisans rather than the other way around. Especially as it is unlikely that Partisans would have organised a solemn burial ceremony for their victims, or published some of their names in the press, praising their heroism and martyrdom.

<sup>56</sup> Zdravko Dizdar, et al., *Partizanska i komunistička represija i zločini u Hrvatskoj*, p. 109.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

<sup>58</sup> "Upute za rad organa određenih za prikupljanje podataka i dokaza za utvrđenje zločina okupatora i njegovih pomagača," dated 19. August 1944, AJ, Fond 110, K-1, 10; "Prikupljajte fotografije!"

bears the hand-written note: "During their retreat, Ustaše in Jasenovac killed all the inmates and threw the bodies in the river."<sup>59</sup>

### Iconography of violence: between idolatry and invisibility

The preoccupation with fascist atrocities and atrocity images, apparent in the first few years after the end of the Second World War, diminished after 1948. Heroism and resistance of the partisans gradually became such a dominant motif in the official memory of the Second World War, that it left little room for remembering the plight of "victims of fascism." Also, the motif of ethnic violence during the occupation, including Ustasha atrocities at Jasenovac, became side-lined in official discourse because it posed significant challenges to one of socialist Yugoslavia's foundational myths, namely the idea of "brotherhood and unity" between constituent nations.

Nevertheless, atrocity images continued to be used in representations of this camp. A dual representational strategy marked the socialist period, one that reflected the ambivalence of the authorities towards Jasenovac as an object of memory. On the one hand, there was a reluctance to rely too heavily on portrayals of Ustasha violence that, as one official put it in the 1960s, takes "the full naturalism" to an extreme and "makes the hairs on one's neck stand on end."<sup>60</sup> Hence, most publications of the Jasenovac Memorial Museum did not include graphic images, but instead relied on photographs of ruins or artists' impressions. This was related to the more general tendency, in accounts of Jasenovac, to deflect the ultimate responsibility for the atrocities to the German Nazis, rather than dwell specifically on the pathology of the Ustashe. On the other hand, above all through survivor testimony and vernacular memory, Jasenovac remained a symbol of fascist depravity. So, in documentaries, including those shown in the Jasenovac Memorial Museum, as well as in published survivor testimonies, the familiar iconography of violence, including the scenes from Sisak, continued to play a prominent role in searing Jasenovac into the memory of Yugoslavs.<sup>61</sup> The two visually very different ways of picturing Jasenovac existed side by side, and their relative visibility was determined by specific political needs. It is probably not by accident that spikes in visibility of atrocity images coincided with concerns about the rise in Croatian nationalism in the early 1970s and 1980s, or in response to periodic attempts, by Croatian nationalists, to challenge the official narratives of Jasenovac. Just like after the war, atrocity images were used as weapon against "the evils of chauvinism."<sup>62</sup>

Crucially, it would be erroneous to view the various misattribution of images, which continued throughout the post war period, purely through the prism of propaganda or political instrumentalisation. They were the manifestation of a continuing, and often genuine desire to render visible the very *real* horrors of Jasenovac, a desire fuelled by broader assumptions about the immediacy and authority photographs and their crucial importance in evidencing fascist atrocities. As Jasenovac came to stand metonymically for the brutal Ustasha genocide in the Independent State of Croatia, it inevitably exercised a centripetal force, attracting images depicting brutal, intimate violence, regardless of their provenance. What made this process possible is that the belief in the indexicality of the image and its unquestionable evidentiary quality went hand in hand with a striking disinterest in the photographs themselves, their origins, and limitations as historical evidence. Just like

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<sup>59</sup> AJ, Fond 110, RZ II 281. In subsequent decades the photograph was relabelled simply "Jasenovac or Sisak".

<sup>60</sup> Heike Karge, *Okamenjeno sećanje, sećanje u kamenu?*, trans. Aleksandra Kostić (Belgrade, XX vek, 2014), p.206.

<sup>61</sup> Egon Berger, *44 mjeseca u Jasenovcu* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod hrvatske, 1966); Nikola Nikolić, *Jasenovački Logor Smrti* (Sarajevo: Oslobođenje, 1978); *Evandjenje Zla*, directed by Gojko Kastratović (Zagreb, Jadran Film, 1973).

<sup>62</sup> Jefto Šašić, "Pregled istraživanja genocida u Jasenovcu," *Naše teme: časopis za društvena pitanja* 30, no. 9, (1986), p. 1288.

in the 1940s, photographs were used as "visual soundbites," or cues, used to illustrate, corroborate, shock, and excite.<sup>63</sup>

The remembrance of Jasenovac in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska is a continuation of this approach to images, taken to the extreme in the late 1980s and the early 1990s when Jasenovac became an obsession of Serbian nationalists, and when it was turned into an instrument of nationalist mobilization and revenge.<sup>64</sup> The ubiquity of atrocity images in Serbia today illustrate well Susan Sontag's dictum that "the problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs."<sup>65</sup> Oren Baruch Stier makes a similar point when he warns against turning icons of suffering—photographs, artefacts, or in the case of Jasenovac also numbers—into idols, which "demand allegiance to the object itself and its own mode of presentation, rather than to what it purports to represent."<sup>66</sup>

On the other hand, the tendency, in Croatia, to view atrocity images purely as an instrument of Serbian propaganda, has taken the matter to the other extreme. It has resulted in the wholesale delegitimization of atrocity photographs as a vehicle of memory, and by consequence, their almost complete sidelining. This approach is inadequate, because it ignores the fact that many images that have been erroneously attributed to Jasenovac, such as the one from Sisak, *do* in fact show the consequences of Ustasha brutality, and that for many descendants of victims and survivors, they are an inherent part of the traumatic memory of genocide. Thus, excluding them from public memory does not resolve the fundamental issue that plagued the representation of Jasenovac from the start, namely, how to picture a traumatic history which has been left invisible by the actions of the perpetrators. Moreover, the absence of images helps to sustain (even if inadvertently) the somewhat "sanitized" version of the horrors of the Independent State of Croatia, which permeates public discourse in Croatia, especially when it comes to the memory of the genocide against Serbs.

A possible solution to the problem of picturing Jasenovac lies in encouraging a different kind of critical engagement with atrocity images, one which treats inaccurate captions as the starting point of analysis, rather than its end. As I have tried to show in this article there is much to be learned from scrutinizing the circumstances surrounding the production and dissemination of atrocity photographs, and the political, cultural, and psychological dynamics by which they become constituted as a credible and appropriate, albeit often contested, representations of a historical event. Such critical engagement is important because it helps move the discussion on from the simplistic question about whether an atrocity image tells us everything or nothing about Jasenovac, and instead invites us to look critically at what atrocity photographs tell us about us, and the history of our way of looking.

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<sup>63</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London, Penguin, 2003), p.9.

<sup>64</sup> Particularly notable in this respect were two exhibitions of atrocity images, very similar in structure and content: *Genocid nad srpskim narodom nekad i sad*, Museum of Applied Arts, Belgrade, 1992 and *Jasenovac: system ustaških logora smrti*, Museum of Vojvodina (Novi Sad) and Museum of Genocide Victims (Belgrade), 1994.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, p.79

<sup>66</sup> Oren Baruch Stier, "Holocaust icons: the media of memory," in *Impossible Images: Contemporary Art after the Holocaust*, ed. S. Hornstein, L. Levitt and L.J. Silberstein (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 215.

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## Images:

"Ustaški zločin u Sisku" [Ustasha atrocity in Sisak]. Croatian State Archives, HDA, Fond Agencije za fotodokumentaciju, Album 31, Ratni zločini I, reproduced with permission.

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